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A NEWS & REVIEW  
MAGAZINE FOR  
THE VISUAL ARTS



OLIVER JACKSON AT HOME IN HIS OAKLAND STUDIO / PHOTO BY DAVID M. ROTH



# GESTURAL GIANT

## A CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER JACKSON

Since 1982, the year he landed a one-man show at the Seattle Museum and found himself included in the Whitney Biennial the following year, Oliver Jackson has ranked among Northern California's foremost painters. A native of St. Louis, 58-year-old Jackson moved to California in 1971 to teach painting at CSUS.

Since then, he's defined a muscular style that fuses the grace of Renaissance masters, the loopy figurative abstraction of Philip Guston and the frenetic gesturalism of '50s abstract expressionism. But what makes Jackson's canvasses unique is not his synthesis of influences, but a singular compositional balance that's only rarely upset by his sheer energy.

When I met Jackson at his Oakland studio, he'd just completed a stage set for the Cleveland Ballet and was directing a crew of movers who were trucking works to three shows opening this month: at the San Jose Museum, the Triton Museum of Art in Santa Clara and the Crocker Art Museum in Sacramento.

What follows is an excerpt of our conversation:

I've always done figures. You do figures out here, you use colors that are bright, and they say Bay Area. I was never a part of that tradition.

How was it that you became an artist?

When I was small, I was always making things. And when you are making things that are non-utilitarian, they call that art. I was just a kid. Making things was just something I did. I didn't question it. One of the things that I think helped my development was in my teenage years. When I was distracted by a lot of things, I would always be privately making something.

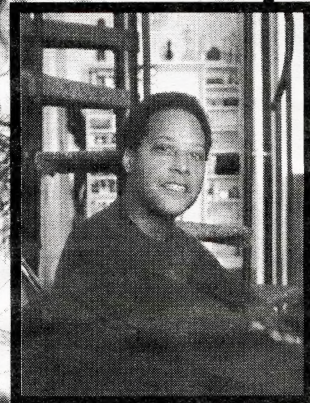


PHOTO BY DAVID M. ROTH

BY DAVID M. ROTH

OLIVER JACKSON: "INTAGLIO DRYPOINT I."



**What sort of work was that?**

Well, it was painting, drawing, carving, stuff like that, and then of course in high school I took art all the way through, no matter what else I was doing.

**Was your family involved in art?**

My father used to paint. He was always something he wanted to do, but couldn't do in a full-time way.

**So doing art was OK.**

It was sanctioned. My parents showed a great deal of reinforcement in that they gave me the time. It was a valid thing to do. Valid meaning, it wasn't what they said, it was how they permitted the activity to be uninterrupted. And that, I think, was the most powerful thing.

**After high school what happened?**

I was very unclear about how to proceed, and after working for about a year in various jobs—construction, warehouse work—that weren't satisfactory, I took a chance in going to Wesleyan University. Once I was there, it opened up: printmaking, painting, sculpture and being in a serious milieu. It was a time of trying to absorb as much information and technique as I could.

**Were you at all involved in abstract expressionism?**

No, but I was very aware of it. As a matter of fact, I was an opponent of it at the time. I didn't understand it. It was very hot. I was looking at it very closely, but I didn't understand what they were doing compositionally. I understood all the talk.

**When did you begin to understand it?**

When I understood that the compositional basis for so-called abstract expressionism was as sound as the compositional basis for Renaissance paintings, and that the structural basis simply left out the standard devices. They were using other devices that were just as sound, and there was nothing frivolous going on. These people were extremely well-trained and understood the visual vocabulary. Their work yielded a power that was apparent when you stood in front of it—whether you liked it or not. It bypassed your taste of what you had seen.

**People have remarked that you've been greatly influenced by music—jazz in particular.**

I should have never mentioned that. Particularly jazz, because it's something that gets thrown at you. I'm really clear on what I mean, but I was much too casual in mentioning that. Let me say, yes: It influenced me in ways that allowed me to approach the visual language with more clarity. I don't think that music as an audio language and the visual language are exchangeable; they're distinct languages, but they have some things in common. With musicians, it was clear how they approached the space that's not yet made into music, the way they open it and take it. The same thing is fundamental to art making.

**When I look at your work there's always a sense of you knowing when to paint and when not to paint.**

I'm very interested in composition as a means of structuring. Most makers of art are. They may not talk about it, but they're real interested in composition. Now the physicality of it is a different thing. You can have different levels of it. I'm interested in a very strong physical hit in the work.

**What parts of African art or culture show up in your work that are distinct from Western Modernist tradition?**

The thing African art opened for me was knowing that any set of material or compositional relationships can work if you can find the interior harmonies that allow that relationship to be absolutely comfortable in a given place. And that anything, therefore, is permissible, if you can find the harmony. Now that's a fairly common idea, but it shows up really strong and clear in African art, in bringing together materials and colors. There are extraordinary means presented that not only feed the aesthetics, but jump right past them.

**In your work, you seem to see Bay Area figurative painting and abstract expressionist traditions as vital. But there are a lot of people who don't. How do you really see it?**

The truth is, I don't think about it. People put that on me. I don't think of them as vital or not vital. It's all talk. I was called an abstract expressionist painter and there were figures in the paintings all the time. They preferred not to see them. Then the neo-expressionists come and go and they saw figures. I'm not from the Bay Area; I've always done figures. You do figures out here, you use colors that are bright, and they say Bay Area. I was never a part of that tradition. People relate to you in relation to what they're

comfortable with. I have opinions about that stuff, but they're not all that strong. The fact is that it doesn't matter. If you want to be true to yourself, to a vision you think you have, you can't attend to all that.

**So how do you relate to post-modernism?**

I don't care about that shit. If there's a good piece, it's a good piece. They call it postmodernism ... who cares? You cannot argue with political correctness, because that's large numbers. Usually it's authenticated by magazines, and I don't know that it's important. One time they said painting was dead. I thought, "Well, there it is. What can I do? I make paintings." It may be dead in the arena of telecommunications, but it never did more than just stand there. It has this power when you stand before it to give extraordinary experiences when you bear witness to it personally.

**So does anybody, post-MTV, have the patience to just stand there and bear witness?**

That's not really my problem. It may be detrimental to me, but you can't consider that when you're working. If there's no audience for it, it's too bad. Every medium has its limitations and I think that video has its limitations, as do all media that appear to move in real time. There's a tendency for media that move in real time to have to authenticate real time, and they have a great deal of difficulty reaching the interior space because the authentication of real outward time has little to do with interior real time. And the experiencing of the still object lends itself to that [interior experience] because it steps out of real time. Therefore, it can open doors to the human being that are frequently not opened in other media.

**Do you think that painting goes after interior reality more powerfully than video?**

I think it can. I don't think it does necessarily. There's a lot of bullshit painting that doesn't do shit. I think there's some powerful videos that do. I just think that with every media, you have to be extremely careful to understand what is it in that media that is in the way.

**What are painting's limitations?**

Oil or watercolor are absolutely beautiful, and it's distracting. They'll put you off because you will stay in the aesthetic place, because it is so drug-like. That's the great Achilles heel of painting and sculpture: that the material will literally take over.